



Educational Considerations

Volume 5 | Number 3

Article 2

4-1-1978

Viewpoint: Understanding the exceptional child

Phyllis Kearns

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Recommended Citation

Kearns, Phyllis (1978) "Viewpoint: Understanding the exceptional child," *Educational Considerations*: Vol. 5: No. 3. <https://doi.org/10.4148/0146-9282.1983>

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This publication is sponsored by the Dean's Grant; Kansas State University and supported by the Department of Personnel Preparation, BEH, HEW (Grant #G00-75-00516). The opinions expressed, however, are those of the authors and no endorsement by HEW is implied.

Viewpoint

Understanding the exceptional child

The education of exceptional children in the "regular classroom is the pressing issue challenging education. Many trends and programs have swept through the institution of education without disturbing the established "truths." Perhaps, the most far reaching changes are embodied in PL 94-142. The new law's (PL 94-142) requirements for extensive and early identification, full service program alternatives, due process guarantees, non-discriminatory testing and evaluation assurances and regular parent or guardian involvement are perplexing and extensive.

The list of requirements continues with stipulations for maintenance of programs and procedures for comprehensive personnel development including in-service training, a guarantee of confidentiality of data and information, special education offered in the least restrictive alternative, surrogate parents for children who have no known parent or guardian and the right of all handicapped children to a free, appropriate public education, at no cost to parents or guardian.

These educational assurances to children and their parents cannot be considered a trend, and no longer can it be viewed as a movement. They are now mandates. The potential impact of the compliance requirements may modify educational traditions, existing services and sanctities more than any other recent challenges and inventions.

Teaching and administrative skills, long neglected, but now crucial to the effectiveness of responsible education must be developed and practiced. Communication skills become increasingly important and necessary. People from a variety of disciplines will be required to function as a team. Parents, and perhaps children, will become members of a working team. They will have a great deal to learn about communicating their personal experiences and expectations for their children.

The attitude of school personnel towards exceptional children is the cornerstone to offering an education in the least restrictive alternative. A teacher that feels little responsibility to an exceptional student placed in his/her classroom will probably not be supportive of the student nor will he/she model a level of acceptance to other class members.

If PL 94-142 is implemented only to meet the "letter of the law," then the potentially good aspects for education will be largely missed. Individual educational plans that will be most helpful in meeting student's needs will demand considerable attention and time. The development of the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) has the potential of being a constructive effort promoting a relationship among core people who support a student's efforts and achievement. If this joint effort is less than successful, the intent and support will be undermined.

The opportunity for education to become personal and relevant is here. As educators, we shall soon know if we have the necessary commitment to a better education for all children. Educators must accept and work with shared decision making. Building administrators will have new responsibilities and more meetings to facilitate.

The responsibilities of all who are part of the teaching and support team may need to be established or clarified. Seldom will the major responsibility of education of an identified exceptional child rest with only one person. General and special education will need to interface, accepting supportive assistance from other resources. If any member of the team presumes to have greater expertise or feels they carry more responsibility in managing the educational program, barriers and breakdowns are likely to occur.

An appreciation by the teachers for individual differences and abilities will forecast the success of the educational placement of the student. Compliance of programs and procedures can be legislated, but attitudes can seldom be altered by command. Positive teacher attitude may be facilitated by requiring introductory courses that provide awareness of children with a variety of characteristics, abilities and needs. Such courses should be offered early in pre-service educational programs. Other measures should be taken to train future and present teachers in curriculum and management strategies that assure attention to individual needs.

The notion that classrooms will be primarily for homogeneous groups can no longer be promoted. Greater appreciation and understanding for differences in people can begin with the acknowledging and accepting of differences in children and their needs in the educational setting.

Phyllis Kearns
Coordinator of the
Dean's Grant